

# Knowledge sharing in inter-professional teams: a toolkit



Dr Vicky Ward  
March 2017

This toolkit is based on work carried out during an independent research project funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The project involved observing how knowledge was shared during case management meetings in 5 community health and social care teams and developing and testing a series of questions to help members of those teams to share knowledge with one another.

The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health

For more information and to download further copies of this toolkit visit <https://mobilisinghealthandsocialcareknowledge.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

You are free to use the materials contained in this toolkit but please contact the author if you wish to do so

Contact details:  
School of Management  
University of St Andrews  
The Gateway  
North Haugh  
St Andrews  
KY16 9RJ  
Fife, Scotland

Email: [vlw4@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:vlw4@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Twitter: @VLWard

**Contents**

Why share knowledge? ..... 4

How do people share knowledge? ..... 4

What helps people to share knowledge? ..... 5

How can we improve knowledge sharing? ..... 5

A tool to encourage knowledge sharing ..... 6

## Why share knowledge?

Sharing knowledge is a vital part of working out how best to deal with difficult situations where there are few clear answers. In frontline health and social care settings these situations typically include how to support and care for people with complex needs and how to protect those people from harm.

These difficult situations are rarely dealt with by individual health and social care professionals, but usually involve a multi-disciplinary or inter-professional team. Increasingly, these teams actively come together to discuss the situation and decide how to proceed.

Inter-professional teams have a wealth of knowledge and information to draw on when deciding how to deal with a difficult situation. This knowledge isn't limited to factual information about the situation itself (e.g. the health conditions or circumstances an individual is living in). It includes ideas, know-how and wisdom team members have gleaned from similar situations and past experiences. It also includes their emotions and feelings about the situation which can help them to identify and prioritise the area(s) of most concern.

Being able to share this knowledge can help teams to come up with new and innovative ideas and solutions and make informed decisions about how to deal with the situation they are discussing.

## How do people share knowledge?

Research has shown that when groups of people are trying to work out how to deal with a difficult situation, their knowledge sharing typically falls into five main areas<sup>1</sup>. The first relates to the problem that they are trying to address. The second relates to the knowledge that is available or needed to address the problem. The third relates to the context in which they are working and in which knowledge is to be found and used. The fourth relates to the ways in which they identify, share and access knowledge. And the fifth relates to the ways in which they use knowledge. All of these areas interact in a fluid, non-linear way and do not necessarily lead from one to another. The areas can be usefully grouped into three sets of activities which represent how groups of people share knowledge with one another.

- 1) Identifying the main area of concern
- 2) Identifying and sharing relevant knowledge
- 3) Considering how to access and use knowledge

---

<sup>1</sup> [Ward V, Smith SO, House A, Hamer S. Exploring knowledge exchange: a useful framework for practice and policy. \*Social Science and Medicine\*. 2012; 74 \(3\):297-304](#)

## What helps people to share knowledge?

There are a number of key things that seem to help people to share and knowledge within inter-professional teams. They include:

- Having a shared aim (this could include improving the situation being discussed or simply making a decision about how to deal with the situation)
- Admitting unease, uncertainty and concern about the situation and exploring that uncertainty with the group
- Asking questions about how and why the situation has come about, previous decisions have been made or actions have been taken (i.e. not just what has happened, been decided or done)
- Making connections between the situation being discussed and previous situations which the team has dealt with (and considering what has been learned that could be applied to the current situation)
- Being open and receptive to knowledge from various sources and willing to learn from others (including people from different backgrounds and/or with different levels of experience)
- Taking time/space to think, reflect and tell stories about the situation being discussed as well as previous situations and past experiences

## How can we improve knowledge sharing?

It is common for inter-professional teams to encounter difficulties when trying to share knowledge about how to deal with a difficult situation. This is often because they have struggled to identify their main area of concern, what they already know and/or how to access and use knowledge to address the situation they are dealing with.

Asking questions can help to overcome some of these difficulties by reminding, encouraging and helping people to share knowledge in relation to these three areas. Questions can also open a space for groups of people to develop a shared aim, air uncertainties, make connections to previous experiences and learn from others.

## **A tool to encourage knowledge sharing**

The table on the following page shows a range of questions to encourage and enable inter-professional teams to share knowledge when they are trying to work out how to deal with a difficult situation. The questions are divided into 3 areas, each of which represents one aspect of how groups of people share knowledge. The table also gives an indication of when to consider asking the questions.

Since groups of people share knowledge in a fluid, non-linear way, the questions are not necessarily designed to be asked in a particular order and can be repeated as many times as necessary. It is not uncommon, for instance, for groups of people to find that asking questions about how to access knowledge prompts further discussion about what is already known. Some questions are likely to be more relevant and useful than others in different situations. The main aim is to use the questions in a way that helps teams to develop ideas and solutions and make informed decisions about how best to deal with the situation being discussed.

The questions are based on previous research and on observations of inter-professional meetings between health and social care practitioners. They have also been tested and discussed with health and social care practitioners.

Questions about:	The main area(s) of concern	What is known	Accessing and using knowledge
<p><b>Example questions:</b></p> <hr/> <p>What is the biggest/ underlying issue?</p> <hr/> <p>What are we worried about?</p> <hr/> <p>What is the issue we want/need to address?</p> <hr/> <p>Why is this an issue?</p> <hr/> <p>What are we struggling with?</p> <hr/> <p>Why do we want/need to do something?</p> <hr/> <p>Who is this an issue for?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>What do we know/think/ feel about this situation?</p> <hr/> <p>What do other people affected by the situation know/think/feel?</p> <hr/> <p>Do we all know/think/ feel the same?</p> <hr/> <p>Have we tried to do something about this situation before?</p> <hr/> <p>Have we dealt with a similar situation before?</p> <hr/> <p>What do we know about how to address this situation?</p> <hr/> <p>What do we usually do about this type of situation?</p> <hr/> <p>How do we capture what we know?</p>	<p>What do we need to know to move forward?</p> <hr/> <p>How do we find the knowledge we need?</p> <hr/> <p>Who else might know something about this situation?</p> <hr/> <p>Who do we need to talk/ listen to?</p> <hr/> <p>Has anyone else tried to do something about this situation?</p> <hr/> <p>Has anyone else dealt with a similar situation?</p> <hr/> <p>How do we use what we know/find out to develop a solution?</p> <hr/> <p>What might influence our ability to use knowledge?</p> <hr/> <p>How do we share what we know with others?</p>
<p><b>Ask these questions when:</b></p>	<p>There is a lot of generalised worry, concern or frustration about a situation</p> <p>The discussion is going round in circles without any forward movement</p> <p>Lots of questions are being asked and/or ideas are being put forward which seem to address different aspects of the situation</p>	<p>During discussion people are using phrases like 'I don't know', 'I'm unsure'</p> <p>The main area of concern comes up frequently when discussing other situations</p> <p>Few team members are involved in the discussion</p> <p>People are only passing on factual information about the situation</p>	<p>There is little consideration of what is known by others who are outside the immediate discussion</p> <p>The main area of concern relates to another part of the system/another service</p> <p>The discussion is going round in circles without any forward movement</p> <p>Few decisions are being made about how to move forward</p>